

## FROM FIELD AND STUDY

**Overnight torpidity in Australian arid-country birds.** —The evidence for torpidity in some Australian birds provided by Serventy (*Emu*, 70, 1970: 27 and 201) and Congreve (*Emu*, 72, 1972: 32) draws attention to a phenomenon which, I believe, occurs far more generally in Australia than ornithologists have ever contemplated.

My experiences in pursuit of birds for avicultural purposes suggests that torpidity is a physiological device which small passerines in particular would have to develop in order to survive in near-desert climates. In the winter months the nights are usually bitterly cold but after the sun rises the days are pleasant and equable. A small-bodied bird, if it could enter a state of suspended animation each night, would survive better in such an environment, by an economy of energy, than one which had to ingest extra food to keep warm.

I have noted overnight torpidity in a number of species, including, young Crimson Chat (*Epthianura tricolor*), adult Banded Whiteface (*Aphelocephala nigricincta*), adult Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*) and adult White-fronted Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris albigrons*).

The case of the Crimson Chats is interesting. In this species the young disperse from the nest at an early age and each individual spends the night separately on the ground in a torpid state, superficially resembling death. I have picked them up early in the morning and the birds remained inert for some time in the hand before warmth gradually revived them. I have observed young Banded Whitefaces captured by Mr T. Spence, Director of the South Perth Zoological Gardens, on a winter desert tour, and found them to enter a torpid state each night in a very similar manner to that described by Heumann (*Emu*, 26, 1926: 110) for the Mistletoe bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*). They revived with increasing warmth in the mornings.

— NOEL IVES\*, 6 Lilian Avenue, Applecross W.A. 6153. (\*deceased)

**An early record of over-night torpidity in Western Australian birds.** —The occurrence of dormancy or torpidity in Australian arid-country birds has only comparatively recently been demonstrated, and the only published observations are cited in the foregoing note. The earliest Australian record of the phenomenon appears to have been made by Rosendo Salvado, Abbot of New Norcia, in his book, *Memorie Storiche dell'Australia*, published in Rome in 1851, with a Spanish translation in 1853 and a French edition in 1854. But the first English translation was published by Fr. E.J. Storman only in 1977, under the title of *The Salvado Memoirs*, University of Western Australia Press, and until its publication the significance of Salvado's observation had been overlooked by naturalists. Salvado wrote: "Not seldom in the winter season, that is June and July, I have found birds big as a thrush, which had fallen to the ground benumbed by the bitter cold of the night; I would take them up in my hands and not let them go until they had recovered their natural warmth."

— D.L. SERVENTY, Nedlands.

**Notes on a movement of young Banded Stilts.** —In September 1981 while driving along the road from Menzies to the Mount Ida Mine one of us (B.J.) noticed small groups of Banded Stilt chicks on the road. From just west of Lake Ballard north for 60 km, groups of 30-40 birds were encountered every kilometre or so, all running south. Motorists using the road scattered the chicks causing some fatalities; however, the chicks could not be headed and they quickly sped around any obstacle. All were juveniles and of similar age, no adults were seen. The vegetation was dry mulga country; no water was seen in the vicinity.

It is obvious that breeding had taken place and the young were undertaking a mass overland migration by walking; perhaps from Lake Barlee to Lake Ballard.

— RAY GARSTONE and BRIAN JEFFERIES, Woodanilling, W.A.

**White-winged Triller on Rottneest Island.** —The White-winged Triller *Lalage sueurii* has been listed as a vagrant on Rottneest Island on the basis of 3 specimens collected by C.P. Congreve in 1903 (Glauert 1929; Storr 1965).